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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001693

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS; NSC FOR E. MILLARD;
LONDON FOR POL/RIEDEL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09-12-12

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINS](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: On the eve of talks with the Tamil Tigers,
GSL buoyed by pro-peace mood among public

Refs: (A) Colombo-Sa/INS 09-12-02 fax

- (B) FBIS Reston Va DTG 120234Z Sep 02
- (C) FBIS Reston Va DTG 100241Z Sep 02
- (D) Colombo 1629, and previous

(U) Classified by W. Lewis Amselem, Charge d'Affaires.
Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

¶11. (C) Summary: The Sri Lankan government's decision to lift its ban on the Tamil Tigers last week has provoked surprisingly little negative reaction. The pro-peace mood of the public has clearly buoyed the GSL ahead of next week's talks with the Tigers. In fact, after a large pro-peace rally, the government felt confident enough to move forward with a much discussed bill limiting presidential powers this week. Despite the positive atmospherics, the situation remains fluid, with the GSL eager to downplay the notion that the talks will result in fast progress. End Summary.

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Lifting of Ban sparks little opposition
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¶12. (C) The Sri Lankan government's decision to lift its ban on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last week has provoked only limited negative reaction. Immediately after the ban was lifted, parties with Sinhalese extremist leanings such as the Janantha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Sihala Urumaya (SU) issued harsh critiques of the GSL's decision, asserting that it was a reward to terrorists and would lead to the creation of a Tamil "Eelam" state. Even President Kumaratunga and members of her People's Alliance (PA) party got into the act with statements questioning the government's decision.

¶13. (C) Despite the hard-edged public attacks, however, the JVP, SU, and elements of the PA have not been able to mobilize effectively against the government. Thus far, their promises to take the issue to the streets in order to rattle the government have gone unfulfilled. (Note: In fact, the largest demonstration this week was a pro-GSL, pro-peace rally -- see below.) For her part, after her initial criticism of the GSL, Kumaratunga has since backed off, apparently because she sensed the public mood was not right.

¶14. (C) The lack of a serious negative reaction is telling about the public mood in Sri Lanka. For some years now, the LTTE has made the lifting the ban a sine qua non for talks. The widespread assumption was that it would be politically difficult, even suicidal, for the GSL to take the step due to the loathing many Sri Lankans maintained toward the LTTE due to its record of serial terrorism. Observers believe that the fact that the de-banning move has not provoked much opposition -- at least not yet -- indicates just how popular the GSL's peace initiative is among the public. In making this point, Tomas Stangeland, polchief at the Norwegian Embassy, told us that his impression was that "the public is war-weary and does not want the government to fight the LTTE again if there is any way talks can work out."

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Pro-Peace rally Buoys GSL
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¶15. (C) Indicative of the positive public mood, a pro-peace rally this week clearly buoyed the GSL ahead of the talks with the Tigers. In an impressive show of its political strength, the government sponsored the large-scale rally in Colombo on September 9. For Sri Lanka, the crowd -- an estimated 400,000 people -- was immense and a decided feather in the GSL's cap, despite the fact that most of the crowd was apparently dragooned to participate by parties affiliated with the governing coalition. While noting that much work needed to be done, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe and his key ministers used the occasion to stress that the peace

process has made significant progress. The PM, for example, was quoted as stating:

"From insisting on dividing the country, the LTTE is now talking about sharing power...Close links have developed between the north and the south. Significant progress in the economy can be seen. Tourists and investors are now coming due to the current peaceful atmosphere."

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Bill Limiting President's Powers

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16. (C) Clearly feeling confident about its political standing, the government moved forward this week with a much discussed bill limiting presidential powers. The key provision of the bill -- which is referred to as the "19th amendment" -- would strip the president of the right to call new elections one year after the last parliamentary election. From now on, per the proposed bill's provisions, the president would only have the right to call an election with two-thirds support in Parliament. Another provision in the bill would allow for crossover voting without penalty. The GSL published the bill for the first time this week (see Ref A), issuing it to the press for public scrutiny. President Kumaratunga immediately came out against the draft, claiming (correctly) that the GSL was trying to diminish her position. (Note: For its part, the GSL wants the bill passed so as to prevent the President from calling elections should the peace talks necessitate potentially unpopular compromises.)

17. (C) When asked whether the bill would pass Parliament, Joseph Pararajasingham, a senior Tamil National Alliance (TNA) MP, told us that the bill did indeed have the two-thirds support it needed thanks to TNA support and support from PA defectors. He predicted that the actual vote on the bill would only take place at some point in October or November.

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Comment

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18. (C) Sri Lanka is feeling like a lucky country -- or at least luckier than the one that faced years of ethnic fratricide. The good news keeps coming: Peace talks are slated to start next week; the now-legal LTTE has seemingly jettisoned its past penchant for mass homicide; the country is getting international attention (as witnessed by the Deputy Secretary's recent visit and the PM's recent meeting with President Bush); etc.

19. (C) All that said, the positive public mood is still a tentative one, with many people worried whether it all has been a chimera: is the LTTE serious about peace? and can the parties in the south cooperate long enough to see the process through? remain vivid questions. Given the potential fluidity in the situation, the government has been wise in underscoring that the talks will be a tough slog and that expectations should not grow too expansively. End Comment.

110. (U) Minimize considered.

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